

Building a Bridge between the Worlds of Counseling and Philosophy –
Lessons from the World of Karl Jaspers

Shanti Jones, Ph.D.
Independent Scholar
Taos, New Mexico, USA

Abstract:

Karl Jaspers, a psychiatrist turned philosopher, always maintained an interest in all facets of what it means to be human. Because of this, his writings contain many ideas which can be useful to counselors of all persuasions. This paper introduces four of Jaspers' ideas, which, when considered together, create a positive feedback loop that leads to greater efficacy in the counseling setting.

The first, limit situations, includes the kind of situations a client is commonly in when she decides to seek help, for example encounters with death, suffering, guilt, or loss. The second, meaningful connections, involves finding and establishing significant relationships that lead to greater understanding of what the client herself finds important. The third the use of symbols, facilitates the client's encounter with Being and gives her access to the Truth. The fourth, freedom, encourages the client to weigh all possibilities of a situation and to choose what is best for herself.

The dynamic process that ensues by interacting with these four ideas throughout the counseling process can enable the client to have a stronger sense of herself and to be more resolute as the subject of her life. The case study of a thirteen-year old girl, whose presenting problem was cutting herself, is used to demonstrate how these four ideas can yield efficacious outcomes.

Keywords: cypher, freedom, limit situations, meaningful connections, philosophical counseling, symbols, transcendence.

Introduction:

Karl Jaspers began his professional life as a psychiatrist. His first major work, *General Psychopathology*, generated a movement of thought about what it means to be human. His interest in the psychology of man spread into his philosophical works, which make many of them useful to counselors, regardless of their training and theoretical framework.

This paper presents a dynamic model designed to be used in the counseling setting and derived from four important ideas of Jaspers: the significance of symbols, meaningful connections, limit situations, and freedom. When utilized by the counselor in concert, the client is helped to understand and transcend the limit situation she is in when she seeks counseling. By recognizing what is meaningful to her, and by being encouraged to make a choice based upon that, the client

will become stronger and freer to create a life of her own choosing. This enables her to be free to transcend the limits of future situations in which she will find herself and to have a greater capacity to take on more complex challenges.

In order to demonstrate this model in action, the case presentation of a 13-year-old girl who was referred because she was cutting herself is offered. Because it involves her “coming of age,” the use symbols, meaningful connections, ultimate situations, and freedom are particularly relevant and can be shown in high relief. This case also demonstrates how, when the counselor helps the client gain an understanding of and internalize this process, she can ultimately make herself unnecessary.

The Case:

At the point “Juliet’s” parents brought her for counseling, these upper middle class, college educated, practicing Catholics were up against the limits of their understanding. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn’t figure out why their daughter, “out of the blue,” was now cutting herself. They were experiencing anxiety and guilt, wondering how this destructive behavior could be happening within the confines of their own home. They wanted this potentially life threatening behavior to stop, so they brought her to me for counseling because they hoped I would be able to help.

Limit Situations:

Jaspers calls the kind of circumstance Juliet and her parents were in, “limit” or “ultimate” situations. These include suffering, struggle, death, chance and/or guilt. When these situations occur, a person experiences her lack of ability to comprehend fully what is happening. There is nothing firm or stable, no absolute to rely upon, and no support for her experience and thought. Her vision does not extend far enough to help her to know what to do. She is up against the limits of her own understanding.

Being in limit situations is very uncomfortable. The person often wants to ignore or escape from them. A healthier alternative would be to make use of what she is faced with to expand her level of awareness, while increasing her ability to deal with life’s on-going complexities. This alternative makes limit situations fruitful domains for establishment of what is meaningful and for the freedom to make choices based on what she values. In this way, she can more fully realize her authentic self. Since this is not a simple, straightforward process, the most productive place for a person to make full use of limit situations is generally with a counselor who understands their value. (Schlipp, P., 1957.)

Since none of us, Juliet, her parents, or myself, understood why cutting had become a meaningful activity for her, one of my starting points was to try to find this out. I hoped that she could become free to choose other, healthier alternatives. Though an obvious place to start might have been a traditional psychiatric or psychological approach, Juliet’s parents chose me to be her

counselor because they knew my thinking tended toward the philosophical, rather than the psychological. Because Juliet did not look like someone who was trying to avoid a complete psychotic break or about to commit suicide (Strong, 2009), I was better able to set aside what I had previously learned about people who self-injure and directly address the lovely, intelligent, yet shy girl who was now my client.

I asked Juliet questions to help her become more aware of why she was cutting herself, such as, “What does it do for you?” “What kind of relief does it give you?” and “How does it make you feel when you cut yourself?” I found she could not answer those questions, and she did not want to talk about cutting herself. She felt she could stop cutting herself on her own, and she did not want any exercises that related to bringing greater awareness to that behavior.

Because my work with clients is participatory, I took her at her word and began to identify the things she was most interested in exploring, the things that were meaningful to her. I did this through dialogue and through the use of symbols. Over time, we came to understand that she wanted to learn what her feelings and needs were; how to express them, not only at home, but at school and with her friends; how to know what she was interested in; what she liked and didn’t like; and how to think things through and make good decisions. As it turned out, our intuitions about how to proceed were correct.

Meaningful Connections:

Knowing what is important to the client is essential to a good outcome. A useful tool that comes from phenomenology suggests that the counselor understand the world of the client and her lived experience. Without putting any abstractions on top of the client’s experience, the counselor becomes capable of entering into her world, with her particular and multifaceted intentions, as well as her beliefs and involvements. Gradually the counselor comes to understand what the client values, how one event emerges from another in her life, and the ways they are linked together. This process is called a phenomenological reduction. It enables the counselor to recognize the client’s identity beyond its surface appearance.

Jaspers refers to this process as the establishment of meaningful connections. It is important that these connections be identified because they are key to the client’s and the counselor’s understanding of the situation and key to enabling the client to address it in the best possible manner. In this case, I identified the connections meaningful to Juliet in four ways: by hearing the significant content she disclosed about herself; through my observations of her mannerisms and behaviors; through my own self-reflection; and through the symbols she used when she engaged in a process called sand play. As you will see, these four elements converged into one coherent whole, and each illuminated it from its own point of view

Symbols:

Over my many years of counseling, I have often made use of a tool called “sand play,” which utilizes symbols as its basis of communication. Jaspers’ chapter, *Truth and Symbol* (Jaspers, K., 1959), from *Von der Wahrheit*, was essential in helping me to justify its use within the confines of philosophical counseling. His explanation of symbols as cyphers which can disclose the transcendent ground of empirical existence and provide a path to authentic selfhood cinched my argument as to why philosophical counselors would want to consider using sand play in their work

Sand play, developed in the first half of the 20th century by Margaret Lowenfeld, a British pediatrician, is a process in which the client makes a scene, or series of scenes in a small sandbox using miniature toys. A complete sand play collection ideally contains everything in the world. People of all cultures, religious figures, wild and domestic animals, fantasy figures, houses, plants, and vehicles are among some of the things commonly represented. The client is instructed to pick figures from the shelves they particularly relate to and then to arrange them in the sand box in a way that makes sense. Whatever the client picks is meaningful. Through observing the scene she creates, the client and counselor find the connections that make each figure relevant, and they have an opportunity to view her symbolic world.

For Jaspers, genuine philosophizing involved the hovering of one’s thought between the thought itself and the world. Symbols, which he refers to as cypher-scripts of being (along with religion, philosophy, and art), are a bridge between the Self and the world. They can provide the person with a philosophical awareness of being.

Sand play, with its use of symbols, can be considered a form cypher-script. Not only do the worlds the clients create reveal their Being in a way that couldn’t be seen otherwise, they are also helpful in coming to understand what a client is meaningfully connected to, and helpful in illuminating her world view. Sand play, like all other symbols, also helps the client to overcome subject-object duality, to know the truth of her Existence, and to live from the place of that truth.

Though some philosophical counselors might object to the use of symbols on the grounds that they are not rational, Jaspers emphasized the importance of including the non-rational in the domain of human existence. Reason alone cannot overcome the subject-object dichotomy, nor can it exhaust the possibilities of understanding one’s Self and one’s world. This is why human beings need symbols. They enable consciousness of being in the objective world through the grasping of the object, which simultaneously brings about the consummation of subjectivity. It is only by holding the subject and the object together that the individual finds truth. Although, as far as I know, Jaspers did not know about the practice of sand play with its use of symbols, I can’t help but think, given his understanding of the prime importance of symbols in encounters with Being and the truth, that he would have been enthusiastic about its use.

Juliet’s Being as Revealed through her Symbolic World:



This is a photo of the second sand world Juliet created. To the untrained eye, it might appear to be a box of sand with some toy figures in it. However, for the eye trained to think in terms of truth as being found in the polar relationship of subject and object, of world views, and of symbols as cyphers of transcendence, this photo presents an opportunity to experience a representation of Juliet's Being at the point in time in which she constructed this sand tray.

Within her world, on the surface of things and objectively speaking, are two houses, a church, some trees, Disney figures, dogs, rabbits, snails, a sheep, a llama, and a representation of a wave. But, if you stop to think that Juliet chose each object in the tray as well as choosing where she placed them, you can begin to conduct a phenomenological reduction of the world she created. She is the subject, in polar relationship to the figures she chose, the objects. Through the process of perception, imagination, and representation, and in experiencing the world she created, her inchoate Being began to become present and more real.

Juliet's meaningful connections to this world she created were first established through what she had to say about it and the things contained within it. While hovering in a balance between Self and Other, Subject and Object, she began to know what was important to her. Through what she freely chose, as well as by what she said, she began to make it possible to transcend both herself and her situation.

What are some of the understandings Juliet and I gained through observing and talking about her world? First, we noticed there were no people. Her world included only animals and fantasy figures. As we talked more about her situation, she revealed that people were frightening to her. She was afraid of their negative judgments. Because of her fear, she could not get close to them. As she came to understand her view of her world as being a frightening one, she and I set about constructing rational thought patterns that better served her and allowed her to become closer to others.

We also noticed there is nothing in the center of her world. In order to be the Subject of one's life, one must be located in the center of her world. Coupled with the observation that it is a sheep who seemed to be surveying the whole scene, and that, like in Handel's Messiah, "All we like sheep have gone astray," the need was recognized for Juliet to begin to move to the center of her life, to become the Subject of it. This became a focal point of our work.

In front of the house she labeled as belonging to her grandmother are a few friendly dogs and bunny rabbits. By contrast, she placed two snails in front of the house she said was the family home. This ultimately led us to talk about how safe she felt to be herself at her grandmother's home, while at her own home she often felt vulnerable – like a snail that can so easily be squished when stepped upon.

A group of familiar Disney cartoon characters, whom Juliet called her family, can be found in the lower right hand corner of her world. Her choice of humorous, yet satirical, figures to embody this caricature of her family epitomized her experience of feeling like "a cartoon figure in a cartoon graveyard." Like Paul Simon on his album, "Graceland," we would look for her shot of redemption by giving her and her parents tools which would transform them from parodies to authentic human beings and which would allow her to feel safer, especially within the confines of her immediate family.

Juliet put the same church in every world she made. At that time, her religious beliefs were adopted from Catholicism. Perhaps for that reason she placed her spiritual life, as represented by the church, on the periphery of her world, rather than in the center of it. However, because she was persistent in placing the church in her world, she was revealing her spiritual life as something that she held sacred. This makes it very likely that at some point in time she will engage in the task of making her spiritual life her own.

During the course of our work together, Juliet made five worlds in the sand. Each enabled us to further establish what was meaningful to her and gave us the means to talk about it, whatever "it" was. For example, the different kinds of domestic animals and plants gave her the opportunity to talk about her love of nature and of spending time alone, which she especially wanted to do more of. When I asked her what kinds of activities she enjoyed doing alone, she mentioned sketching. At that time, she shared a bedroom with her younger sister. In the course of that

conversation, it came up that if she had a room of her own, she could enjoy sketching as much as 2½ hours a day within its confines.

When Juliet entered counseling, her parents were so desperate to stop her cutting behavior that they were thinking of removing all the interior doors in their home so that Juliet would never have an opportunity to be alone and therefore would be unable to cut herself. Intuitively I felt Juliet needed more time alone, not less, but I didn't have any substantial "proof" to support my intuition. When I was able to tell them of her expressed desire, revealed through the symbols she chose, her parents furnished Juliet with a room of her own. I believe that obtaining this space was another factor in her discontinuing her destructive behavior. She was given a safe place to allow her inside life to come out creatively.

Other symbols Juliet chose in later sessions that proved to be of importance included those of a girl runner and a cheerleader. These were significant in helping her to know what she was meaningfully connected to, and to more fully becoming the subject of her life. At the beginning of our work, Juliet could not admit what her interests were. As a result, her father thought it best that she should put equal efforts into volleyball and basketball. He was getting ready to send her to volleyball camp because he thought it would be good for her. Once Juliet was able to voice her definite preferences for track and cheerleading, she was able to get her parents to support her interests, rather than theirs.

Her choices even affected the family vacation that year. Her parents had decided Las Vegas would be the perfect place to go. However, when, through her choice of the Disney characters mentioned earlier, as well as of the palm tree and water wave, Juliet was able to talk about her love of California, Disneyland, and the beach, they decided a trip to Southern California would be a better idea. Not only did she get to have the vacation of her choice, she also gained the opportunity to become a real person in a family that responded to her requests. The trip never would have happened if she had not made her wishes known. This is another example of how she learned to know what she wants and give voice to it. By doing this, she is much more likely to get what she wants and to feel satisfied.

One additional symbol she chose nicely illustrates how readily a symbol becomes a cypher of transcendence when the space is made for that to happen. This was a camera. Her use of that figure led us to talk about her love of being creative. I asked her to name some of the ways her creative abilities express themselves. It took her no time to mention other things besides photography. Finding different ways to solve math problems, drawing and painting, weaving, working with clay, and being a coach for younger children were included in her list of creative activities she enjoyed and found meaningful. Through our dialogues, Juliet came to realize that her creativity is a strength, something she can always draw upon, not only for her benefit, but also for the benefit of others.

Each of the five sand worlds Juliet created can be understood as a cypher-script of her Being which enabled her to transcend the situation she was then in. Said another way, she achieved a greater understanding of herself and her world, which empowered her to make connections with, and to learn about, those things that were meaningful to her. Each world she created enabled her to discover and to learn about her authentic self as it presented itself to her in her historic present. Through each creation, she came to be more open towards herself and her future, in which the actualization and communication of new forms of her Being were, and will continue to be, realized.

As long as men and women have been living on this earth, they have found meaning in symbols. As can be seen in this case, the primary material to be communicated through them is not intellectual, but rather represents a quality of experience. (Jacobi, J., 1959.) Their essence is a tone of feeling, something that an empirical description could not provide. The encounter with symbols can help a client to enter a very different atmosphere, one in which the relationship between her personal existence and the universe around her is transformed, thereby enabling her to transcend her current situation through thought and subsequently by action.

Freedom

As I began to understand Juliet through her meaningful connections, rather than focusing on emotional pain and confusion, I began to think of her in more existential terms. She was a young woman who had not been allowed to be free to become herself. As a result, she could not make decisions and be responsible for them. She could not become the subject of her life. Thus, part of our work would be to help her to establish herself as a free agent in a world she would have a hand in creating.

A person becomes free by broadening her world orientation, by visualizing and enacting possibilities of action, and by allowing all motives to speak and work within herself. The origin of freedom arises when it is pitted against the superficiality of chance and against the arbitrary volition of the moment. As it is enacted, the process of “I am, I must, I will, I chose” becomes the person’s source of freedom. (Jaspers, K., 1970.)

Pragmatically speaking, the challenges were: How would Juliet and I find solutions to problems that arose from her authentic self, rather than from the child she had been conditioned to be? In what situations would I help her learn to make choices that would show her more clearly to herself, choices freely made, and arising from what was meaningful to her, rather than what was imposed? If she could learn how to make independent, rational choices from her authentic self and also could learn how to make use of ultimate situations such as the one she was currently in, beyond merely helping her to stop injuring herself, these would be very good outcomes.

Fortunately, Juliet’s parents understood that it was entirely possible they had played a part in their daughter’s self-destructive behavior, and they were willing to change. The three of us started a dialogue regarding their philosophy of parenting. We found that, though in principle they

believed the purpose of raising a child is to help her become an independent, rational human being, their actions did not support that goal.

Rather than helping her to achieve greater autonomy, responsibility, and awareness, Juliet's parents, by being overly controlling and allowing only super high achievements to count, were unwittingly teaching her to be servile and timid. Juliet had to think and act as her parents wanted and always had to behave in the manner they expected. It seemed one of the reasons Juliet was cutting herself was that it was one of the only autonomous acts she could think of by which she could communicate her distress, and that also gave her some release and relief.

Over time, I helped these exceptional parents learn that a high degree of insularity and control doesn't promote motivation or increase a person's will. As a result, they decreased the amount of control they exerted, allowed Juliet to take more risks, increased the number of independent activities in which she could be involved, and encouraged her to take part in exploratory learning, rather than telling her what to do.

Case Summary:

When I reviewed the summaries of all eighteen sessions that took place over a period of nine months, I found in every one various ways in which I helped Juliet to become the subject of her life by establishing the connections that were meaningful to her, and then by helping her to rationally think her way through a process of creating a world that was more satisfying to her as a result. I believe this was what helped her most.

As we worked together, Juliet came to know herself better, which enabled her to become the subject of her life. By the end of our work, she was able to think through such problems as how to assert herself against her music teacher, how to shave time off of her track events, how to decide whether or not to become a cheerleader, and how to manage her time and her grades. It also included becoming the agent of her sexuality, which enabled her growth from that of being a girl to becoming a young woman (Tolman, D., 2002). Although the agreed upon 'highest good' at the beginning of our work was perceived to be helping her to stop cutting herself, by the end it included so much more that enabled her to flourish within a world that she was learning to create to suit herself.

She cut herself only once more while we were working together. As she learned to do other things that made her feel better and that she would like to do more of, and as she learned how to step back from situations and to make better decisions for herself, and as she gained more autonomy, the cutting issue took care of itself. Juliet now had better things to do and successful ways to go about doing them.

Conclusion:

When approaching a problem such as self-injury, many people choose to pursue psychological or psychiatric methods. However, increasing numbers of people don't feel comfortable with these paradigms and would prefer to try another approach. This is when philosophy, specifically the ideas of Karl Jaspers, can be very useful.

Beginning with an understanding of the limit situation the client is in, and then continuing on with the establishment of connections meaningful to the client, established through dialogue and the use of symbols, all with the aim of enabling the client to become free to be the subject of her life, the counseling process becomes a dynamic process of transcendence. Along the way, the client internalizes the capacity to work with these aspects of existence and to utilize them on her own in any situation she will face in the future.

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To contact the author: shanti@barbaraujones.com

